photo by epSos.de (CC BY 2.0)

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki (Eds.)

Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

Institute for
Religious Studies

University
of Heidelberg

Table of Contents

Conference Papers: "Playing God" - On God & Game

Reviews

Beyond Belief

Playing with Pagan Spirituality in *World of Warcraft*[1]

Stef Aupers & Julian Schaap

Abstract

Popular online computer games, like *World of Warcraft*, are full-fledged virtual worlds brimming with ancient religious narratives, mystical worldviews and magical powers. Nevertheless, they are rarely discussed in sociological debates about religion. Online gaming may temporarily invoke a 'willing suspension of disbelief' but it can, given the fictitious nature of the text, never counter the secularization or disenchantment of Western culture. In this essay it is argued that the emphasis on (dis)belief in sociology creates a blind spot for 'play' as an important epistemological strategy to engage with religion. The ambivalent and transgressive nature of play, it is demonstrated, provides the opportunity for young players of *World of Warcraft* to experience spirituality without necessarily believing in supernatural claims; to fully immerse themselves in the 'magic circle' without conversion to a pre-defined set of beliefs and to freely experiment with religious narratives without becoming a true believer.

Keywords

spirituality, play, religion, video games, disenchantment, *World of Warcraft*

1   Introduction

The Church of the Holy Light is a full-fledged religious organization with an arch-bishop, a council of bishops, priests and approximately 800,000 members. Followers don't believe in a transcendent God or deity but rather in a spiritual force that permeates everything. The 'Holy Light', as this force is called, enhances human power whereas its advocates embrace the 'path of the three virtues':

---

[1]   This essay is partly based on fragments from other publications of the first author (Aupers, 2007, 2011, 2014).

respect, tenancy and deep compassion towards everything that lives. The Church of the Holy Light has a long, turbulent history and can nowadays be found about everywhere in Azeroth.[2]

The Church of the Holy Light is not a 'real' religion or spiritual movement but is part of the popular online computer game *World of Warcraft* that is suffused with narratives and tropes about transcendent deities, spirits, animated objects, mysticism and magic (i.e., Aupers 2010). Such 'fiction-based religions' (Davidsen 2014), 'invented religions' (Cusack 2010) or 'hyper-real religions' (Possamai 2005), are increasingly emerging in media texts – in films, series and computer games. The question remains, however, how people engage with such texts and, on a theoretical note, what the implications are for long-standing sociological debates about secularization and disenchantment. Generally (though often implicitly), such debates are informed by a focus on (dis)belief as *the* prime epistemological strategy in the religious field – an approach that seems to be a heritage of the longstanding cultural trajectories of Christianity and modern science in the West. One either believes or one does not – one is either religious or secular; there is hardly a middle position. From this binary perspective fictitious media texts, like those mentioned in *World of Warcraft*, can never have religious significance since, as During (2002) argues, 'once a particular text is deemed to be fiction, then it is impossible simply to believe in the reality of fictional events, whether they are supernatural or not' (p. 49). At best, such texts may invoke a temporary 'willing suspension of disbelief' or 'poetic faith' (Coleridge 1967[1817]) but this does not in any way disturb the typically 'modern divide' (Latour 1993) between fact and fiction, truth and fantasy, belief and disbelief.

Based on an analysis of *World of Warcraft* – of its history, text and experiences of players – we want to move beyond this sociological focus on (dis)belief and investigate the significance of *play* as an unacknowledged epistemological strategy in the religious domain. To do so, we firstly use a content-analysis of themes and narratives in *World of Warcraft* and other games like *Ultima Online*, *Everquest*, *Dark Age of Camelot* and, secondly, fragments of about twenty in-depth interviews with Dutch players – collected, analyzed and coded by the first author. The respondents were selected though 'snowball sampling'. Although different motivations and play styles emerged from the data – varying from 'social', 'achievement' and 'immersion' (e.g., Bartle, 2004; Yee, 2009), we focus in this essay primarily on the latter aspect: the appeal and experience of 'being' in the game-world through role-playing that was generally enjoyed by the majority of players but particularly verbalized by six respondents. Based on the analysis we argue, first of all, that playing with religious narratives is a salient practice in the contemporary spiritual milieu while, secondly, the activity of game play provides the opportunity for gamers to experience enchantment without 'converting' to a particular set of beliefs.

---

2   http://www.wowwiki.com/Church_of_the_Holy_Light, accessed 27-10-2014.

2   Pagan Enchantments: From Middle Earth to *World of Warcraft*

2.1   Myth-making

Over the last decades, it has become a mainstay in the sociology of religion that processes of secularization and disenchantment did not result in a decline of religion as such but, rather, in religious change (i.e., Luckman 1967). While the Christian churches run empty – particularly in North-Western Europe – modern esotericism and new forms of spirituality are blossoming that convey a turn from a transcendent perspective on the divine towards a more immanent frame (Aupers & Houtman 2010; Campbell 2007; Hanegraaff 1996). In the words of Lynch (2007): '(..) spirituality sees our only hope in a re-enchantment of the world, a renewed vision of the divine presence within the natural order that can generate new respect for nature and new ways of harmonious living within the natural order' (p. 54). It is from this perspective that people in the spiritual milieu idealize and mimick 'premodern' cultures and religions – i.e. those of native Americans, Celts, Cathars, Egyptians, Vikings, pagans, witches, shamans and the like. These 'authentic' cultures, it is argued, were still untouched by the cold machineries of modernity and living in harmony with nature. From all the groups in the contemporary spiritual milieu, it is particularly the neopagan movement that embraces this worldview. Neopagans are 'romanticizing the premodern' (Partridge 2004, p. 77) and are, various scholars argue, deeply involved in 'animism', 'polytheism' and 'nature religion' with an emphasis on magical rituals (e.g., Adler 1997; Berger 1999; Hanegraaff 1996; Luhrmann 1991; York 1995).

Notwithstanding its rootedness in all kinds of traditions, the question most relevant for this essay is however: do people in the spiritual milieu – particularly pagans – *really believe*? It can be argued that dedicated belief in a deeper, higher or more spiritual reality is suspect. Neopagans often doubt the ontological status of religious or metaphysical claims whereas it is imperative in the milieu to 'reinvent' your own pagan tradition (Luhrmann 1991). Neopagans are often aware of the socially constructed nature of reality – it is primarily a literary culture and participants ground their worldview in books that claim objectivity *and* fiction to design, legitimate and authenticate their own invented traditions (e.g., Luhrmann 1991; Possamai 2005). Even *Witchcraft Today* (1954) written by Gerald Gardner – the founder of Wicca – is known to be a fictional ethnography. Pagans, in short, are not real believers but self-consciously and playfully create their own 'mythopoeic history' in what they consider to be a 'disenchanted', or 'a myth-impoverished world' (Luhrmann 1991, p. 238, p. 241).

This existential imperative to construct an enchanting world – brimming with spirituality, myth and magic – also characterizes the famous fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien – well known author

of *The Hobbit* (1937), *Lord of the Rings* (1954). His work had a profound influence on the pagan movement and, more recently, on the game industry (Bartle, 2004; Krzywinska, 2008). In 1931 he wrote a poem called *Mythopoeia* (myth-making) in which he rejected the common perception of 'myth' as being 'false', 'not true' or an 'illusion' – a connotation obviously fed by secular Enlightenment and the imperative of scientific thinking. Instead Tolkien proposed to understand myth as containing perennial, universal and spiritual truth and advocated the active construction of such meaningful narratives in a disenchanted modern world. In his famous essay *On Fairy Stories* (1938), Tolkien elaborated on these themes: he emphasized that mythology, not unlike religion, provides eternal truth and 'consolation' vis-à-vis human suffering and persisted that the creation of a mythical 'secondary world' is not a frivolous matter. Although its content should break with modern reality, its form, structure and details should be 'derived from reality' and reflect 'the inner consistency of reality' (Tolkien 1938, p. 16). A good mythmaker, he argued, 'makes a secondary world that your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates to is "true": it accords with the laws of that world' (Ibid., p. 12).

Tolkien practiced what he preached. 'Middle Earth', the location of his trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, is both fantastic and realistic; both mythical and rational and is by far the most influential work in the fantasy genre. Its main narrative – featuring creatures like hobbits, elves, and wizards as main protagonists – is mainly based on Norse mythology and embraces a 'polytheistic-cum-animist cosmology of "natural magic"' (Curry 1998, p. 28). These 'premodern' religious worldviews are important, Tolkien felt, since 'the "war" against mystery and magic by modernity urgently requires a re-enchantment of the world, which a sense of Earth-mysteries is much better placed to offer than a single transcendent deity' (Curry 1998, pp. 28-29).

Tolkien died in 1973, but around that same time his enchanting world was reproduced in cyberspace. As Sherry Turkle (2002) argues: 'The personal computer movement of the 1970s and early 1980s was deeply immersed in Tolkien and translated his fantasy worlds into hugely popular (and enduring) role-playing games' (p. 18). In 1976 a Stanford hacker Donald Woods and a programmer Will Crowther developed *Adventure*, the first text-based role-playing game on the computer. *Adventure* 'turned out to be one of the most influential computer games in the medium's early history' (King and Borland 2003, p. 31). An important shift came in 1980s when Trubshaw and Bartle developed the 'Multi-User Dungeon' (MUDs) that made it possible to collectively explore this textual world. Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s, text-based role-playing games and MUDs were booming. Some examples that are directly derived from the work of Tolkien are *The Shire* (1979), *Ringen* (1979), *Lord of the Rings* (1985), *LORD* (1981), *Ring of Doom* (1983), *The Mines of Moria* (1985), *Bilbo* (1989), *The Balrogian trilogy* (1989) and *Elendor* (1991). In 1996 and 1997 respectively, *Diablo* and *Ultima Online* were launched on the Internet – generally understood as the first 3-dimensional Massively Multiplayer Online Role

Playing Games. In the last decade the MMORPG genre became immensely popular. Well-known examples are *Everquest* (Sony 1999), *Asheron's Call* (Microsoft 1999), *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment, 2001), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007 Turbine, Inc.).

2.2   Enchanting MMOs

No less than 95 percent of the contemporary Massively Multiplayer Online games are based on the 'fantasy genre' (Woodcock 2009). The main narratives of these games differ, of course, in many respects but all hark back to an imaginary medieval society that is yet untouched by the juggernaut of modernity (Aupers 2007). Not unlike neopagans in the spiritual milieu, then, the producers of online worlds construct, or better, literally design a 'mythopoeic history' by cutting and pasting premodern religions, myths and sagas and by offering it for further consumption. The narratives are often derived from well-known western legends, but also popular fiction varying from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, to J.G. Frazer's *Golden Bow* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (e.g., Bartle 2004). By using such intertextual references to other popular (fantasy) texts, Krzywinska (2008) argues, designers constitute an appealing 'combination of otherness and familiarity for players' thereby enhancing feelings of immersion and 'being in a world' (p. 138).

In line with the approach set out by Tolkien, in short**,** MMOs are both extremely realistic and distinctly otherworldly (Castranova 2005, p. 80). This otherworldliness instigated by premodern, mythical and magical content, supports and even enhances the function of play as a 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1950[1938]). It draws strong boundaries between the real world and the game world and, in doing so, contributes to its appeal. On the cover of *WoW* and *UO* one can read:

> A world awaits…Descend into the *World of Warcraft* and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure (..) An infinity of experiences await. So what are you waiting for?

> If you've ever felt like you wanted to step out of yourself, your life, into one that was full of fantasy and adventure – virtual worlds offer you this opportunity.(..) You choose your own virtual life and immerse yourself into the mystical, medieval world of Britannia (..) *Ultima Online* is the place where you can be whatever you want to be.

There are, of course, profound differences between game worlds. The culture of *UO*, for instance, is rooted in specific Anglo-Saxon legends whereas *Dark Age of Camelot* (*DAoC*) is a good example of a game that is exclusively based on Northern European myth and legend. At the beginning of the game, players can choose to be part of one of three territories that each have their own culture,

religion and customs and are at war with each other: Albion (portrayed as Medieval England and informed by 'King Arthur legends'), Midgard (portrayed as ancient Scandinavia and informed by 'Viking mythology') and Hilbernia (portrayed as ancient Ireland and informed by 'Celtic lore'). In the manual of *DAoC*, these three territories try to convince players to join them in their battle against the 'Dark forces of evil' by promising more magic and enchantment than the others:

> Others may tempt you with mighty deeds and fine words, but in Hilbernia we keep closest to the oldest of the spirits of the Earth. Ours is the most mystical, imbued with the spirit of ancient days and long forgotten powers. If you desire to fight with us against the encroachment of evil and darkness, come to the most magical land of all, Hilbernia.

Being 'the most magical land of all', so it seems, is an important asset in rivalry in the game as well as in the competition between online game worlds competing on today's market. In recent applications of the game DAoC, new territories are opened up, like the 'highly advanced civilization' Atlantis (which is according to legend the pinnacle of spirituality), Stygia ('a searing desert where adventurers will encounter creatures from Egyptian mythology') and Volcanus ('Here you will encounter (..) the warlike Minotaurs').

Of course there are multiple, more profane features and functions installed in the architecture of the game world, such as the options to socialize in guilds, explore the environment, compete, work, achieve and gain rewards (e.g., Bartle 2004; Salen & Zimmerman 2004). What the prominence of fantasy indicates, however, is that the construction of a mythopoeic setting is pivotal in constituting enchantment and establishing boundaries between profane modern life and the game world. Most MMOs offer, what John Caputo (2001) called, 'a high-tech religious mythology, a fairly explicit "repetition" or appropriation of elemental religious structures outside the confines of the religious faiths' (pp. 89-90). Unencumbered by historical accuracy, designers cut, paste and sample various popular legends, myths and religious archetypes and combine them into new idiosyncratic worlds. Time and place are subordinated to this imperative of enchantment. As far as religion concerned, the Christian tradition is downplayed in favor of polytheistic and animistic forms of religion. As to the former: various gods and deities – both good and bad – are prominent in all the games. As to the latter: players are encouraged – or even obliged if they want to proceed in the game – to perform various 'quests' to collect spiritual objects, like 'totems' or weapons imbued with 'mana'. Most relevant for the players, however, is the 'art of magic'. Before the game starts, the players construct a character and choose between various races, classes and professions. Abstracted from the differences, it can be concluded that in every game there is the choice to become an explorer, a fighter *or* a magician. Magicians come in sub-classes. Without being conclusive: in *EQ* one can for instance become a 'sorcerer', 'warlock', 'wizard', 'enchanter', 'illusionist', 'coercer', 'summoner', 'necromancer', 'conjurer', 'druid', 'warden', 'fury', 'shaman',

'defiler' or 'mystic'. In *DAoC* one can, for instance, become a 'cabalist', 'rune master', 'bone dancer', 'spirit master', 'healer', 'bard', 'mentalist' or 'animist'. Again, this is just a small sample of the options available. Each subclass has specific abilities and skills. Take the examples of the shaman in *WoW*:

> The shaman is an effective spell caster, but can also fight extremely well with mace and staff. The shaman's line-of spirit spells enables it to perform a variety of useful non-combat actions. It can resurrect allies, turn into a ghost wolf for increased movements, or instantly teleport to town. The shamans unique power is totems. Totems are spiritual objects that a shaman must earn through questing.

Resurrecting the dead, healing, draining souls, summoning spirits, telekinesis, teleport, paralyze, creating energy bolts, becoming invisible, shape shifting, causing earthquakes; the spells and possibilities to perform magic in the games are various. In addition, players can develop their magical skills when they are progressing in the game. In fact, they can have a magical career. As *DAoC* states: 'For those who wish to dabble in the arts of magic and mysticism, there are several paths that lead to a mastery of the arcane.' In *DAoC* they can do so by joining magical schools and guilds. They can become part of the Academy ('the school founded by the famous wizard Merlin'), the Guild of Shadows or the Church of Albion. In *UO*, there are eight levels of magic containing 64 magical spells and rituals. The novice starts at the first level (low-magic) and can advance until the eight level (high-magic). In this last phase, one can attain great – and almost omnipotent – magical powers.

'Why do so many virtual worlds feature magic?' The first author raised this question in an interview with Richard Bartle and he turned it into a topic of discussion among game designers on the blog Terranova. The answers ranged from explanations that magic is a functional trope enhancing the boundaries between the real and the game world (i.e., to construct the 'magic circle' in a metaphorical sense) to speculations about the intrinsic value of magic, myth and mystery and its importance in the modern world. As one designer typically noted:

> Magic is growing in popularity. It's a very compelling way to view the world and can provide more meaning and agency than a viewpoint that is strictly materialist. In a nutshell, we want the magic that was stripped by rational materialism to return back into our lives. Immersive 3D worlds provide a nice playground to this end.

3　Spiritual Play in *World of Warcraft*

3.1　Beyond belief

The question remains if and how players identify with the enchanting forms of spirituality in online game worlds. The 'disenchantment of the world,' Weber argued, generates a nonreligious *and* disillusioned worldview. Under the influence of science and technology, he commented, an otherworldly orientation will be gradually replaced by a worldview that is more objective but undermines – at the same time – the meaning of life. Modern astronomy, biology, physics or chemistry can describe the world as it is, but can (and should!) not teach anything about the ultimate meaning of the world. In a totally 'disenchanted world', Weber argued, 'the worlds processes simply are (..) and happen but no longer signify anything' (1978[1921]), p. 506).

Interestingly enough the majority of players of *World of Warcraft* interviewed subscribe to this existential situation: they are basically nonreligious in a traditional sense *and* disillusioned. First of all, they pride themselves on being atheists incapable of believing in 'supernatural' or 'transcendent' realms and especially traditional forms of religion. One gamer typically argued that '(r)eligions like Christianity and Islam are from the past and no longer relevant for me. They are based on a society from two thousand years ago (..)'. Others state that 'there's nothing holy about the Bible', that religions are just 'fairytales' and that 'only fools believe in God'. They essentially perceive of themselves as too rational and sober ('nuchter' in Dutch) to believe and often literally claim that scientific knowledge essentially can solve and de-mystify all mysteries. As self-proclaimed, 'true atheists' they accept many secularizing scientific propositions derived from evolution theory, physics and computer sciences. One of the gamers provides the most explicit and radical example of this thoroughly rationalized and disenchanted perspective:

> I am completely irreligious. I think a human being is nothing more than an animal – a mechanical organism and you can best compare a human with a computer. The body is like a closet – in this closet you'll find the hardware, everything we learned is written on this hardware, our brains, and our personality is therefore nothing more than software interacting with the world.

Many of the respondents are not only nonreligious but 'lost faith' in a more general sense too. They share, in the words of Caputo, a 'tragic sense of life' (2001, p. 118) and overtly complain about the meaninglessness of contemporary modern society: the 'emptiness' of politics, the problem of unchecked modern capitalism, relentless consumption and the unforeseen consequences of science and technology. One gamer argues: 'Society is all about power and status. You need a job, you need money (..) And all those technologies.. (..) We loose sight on what is really important. People forget:

what are you actually living for?' Another comments: 'Motivated by the aim for more profits we develop technologies we do not understand. We can not see the consequences for humanity but they will be dramatic, I think.' And more bluntly: 'Why should I invest in such a world that is so fucked up?'

The flip-side of this critical analysis of modern, disenchanted society as meaningless is a quite romantic picture of more traditional, premodern society. One gamer notes:

> There's this nostalgic longing for the past when all these things where not there yet. In the old days everything was better. The countryside, sunny summers when everybody was happy. If you walk through the world of *World of Warcraft* this is all there. And you are not constantly confronted with high-tech.

The affinity with the distinctly rural, pre-industrial areas of *WoW* can thus, first of all, be understood as motivated by the disillusions of living in a disenchanted modern society. Like neopagans, many WoW players romanticize the premodern past: they praise the simplicity, moral clarity and 'authenticity' of 'their' virtual world and, most ironically, emphasize the lack of highly advanced technology.

But how do they relate, more specifically, to premodern religion, polytheism, animism and magic that suffuse the online world? As noted, gamers proudly present themselves as too 'rational' to believe. But there's another side to this story – a feeling of loss and disillusion: gamers can not believe in the supernatural but, argue, very much like FBI agent Fox Mulder in the popular series the *X-files* that they 'want to believe.' They have a strongly felt religious longing, in short. As one gamer typically confessed: 'I would really like that there was more than we can see in life. Telepathic connections between people, or special super powers that people are born with – forces that are prominent in everyday life.' Paradoxically, their disenchanted stance motivates these youngsters to enjoy 'superpowers,' magic and spirituality online. In this virtual environment, after all, they can freely *play* with spirituality without believing or without being swallowed up by a belief system. 'Within these worlds you accept everything as it is', one gamer typically comments, 'It is as it is because it is made that way.' Is this engagement with magic, myth and spirituality online indeed 'just' play then – merely entertainment? Things are more complicated than that: play may be understood as an alibi to seriously engage oneself with the meaning of magic, myth and spirituality. More than that: while playing, gamers often *experience* the environment, including its supernatural entities and propositions, as real. Such ontological transformations occur, as we will see, especially through the activity of role-playing.

3.2   The Magic of Role-Playing

It has been assessed in many studies of modern magic in the neopagan movement that 'play' and particularly 'role-playing' are at the heart of magical rituals (e.g., Adler 1997; Berger 1999; Copier 2005; Luhrmann 1991). In general, magic is used in this milieu to 'invoke the powers in nature' but, particularly, to 'summon the powers within.' Berger (1999, p. 33) emphasizes the primacy of this 'magical' or 'divine' Self in ritual performances. Once the 'divine' or 'magical self' is awake, neopagans assume, one passes the border from the profane world to the sacred world where everything is possible and interconnected.

Luhrmann (1991) argues on the basis of her extensive fieldwork that the model of 'play' – or a context of 'let's pretend,' 'as-if' or 'make-belief' – forms an intricate part of such magical acts. Magic involves role-playing: in rituals, the participants are called by another 'magical' name; they often wear exotic, arcane clothes (especially in the tradition of 'Western mystery'); speak in hermetic vocabularies; formulate archaic sentences and utter strange words. In doing so, modern magicians play and often mimic magical behavior derived from fiction in the media:

> Magic involves and encourages the imaginative identification in which the practitioner 'plays at' being a ritual magician or a witch; the theatrical setting and dramatic invocations are directed at evoking precisely that sort of complete identification with what one imagines the magician to be. Here the role models are taken from fiction: the magician fantasizes about being Gandalf, not about being his coven's high priest (Luhrman 1991, p. 333).

Neopagan magic is, however, not 'just play', but 'serious play' since role-playing is constitutive for genuine, out-of-the-ordinary experiences and motivates ontological transformations: in the process of role-playing, fiction becomes real, make-belief instigates belief and play is gradually experienced as serious magic. Johan Huizinga noted in *Homo Ludens* (1950[1938], p. 13): 'The disguised or masked individual 'plays' another part, another being. He is another being.' In the context of neopaganism, a housewife becomes the Greek goddess of hunt Artemis, a teacher becomes Osiris and yet another participant a powerful priest of an ancient Mayan cult, a Celtic druid or Siberian shaman.

Role-playing, in short, is a technique to summon the 'powers within' and align oneself with an imagined 'higher' or 'magical' Self. This applies to online gaming as well. Players choose an archetypical 'character' or 'avatar' which functions as a digital representation of the player. According to Kolo and Baur (2003), the role of the magician is most popular among 'all players' (at least in *UO*). By incarnating a role as, for instance, a 'sorcerer', 'warlock', 'wizard' or 'shaman', players become active subjects in the enchanting online world. Like neopagans, they are often 'naming' their characters and in doing so they are inspired by popular legends, myth and historical

knowledge. As one gamer notes: 'I gave it a beautiful name derived from history – my character lived during the Roman Empire. That's what I really like. And that's the way I experience it in the game'. And more than that: through the act of role-playing, some gamers paradoxically gain access to dimensions of the self and experiences that are not surfacing in real life. Richard Bartle refers to this process as the 'role-playing paradox':

> You're not role-playing as a being, you *are* that being; you're not assuming an identity, you are that identity; you're not projecting a self, you are that self. If you're killed in a fight, you don't feel that your character has died, you feel that you have died. There's no level of indirection, no filtering, no question: you are there (..) When player and character merge to become a personae, that's immersion; that's what people get from virtual worlds that they can't get from anywhere else; that's when they stop playing the world and start living it (2004, p. 155-156).

Our own research validates this point to a large extent. Most players of *World of Warcraft* emphasize that they increasingly identify with their avatars – especially since they invested a lot of time, energy and work in it. One gamer typically argues that 'it has become a part of me' whereas another states: 'It [the character] clearly possesses a fragment of my soul (..)'. Once players experience the in-game character as real, they project personal desires and idealized identities on the avatar. Like neopagans, they unleash and play out their 'better selves', 'magical selves' or 'higher potentials' that cannot be expressed in everyday life. 'A hero that follows his own path and does his own thing – that's the way I have designed him. And I like playing with the idea that I am him. He is a part of me, something that I would like to be', one player contends; 'You can be someone else. I think it is a beautiful world full of fantasy – a world that you encounter only in books. Unlike in real life, you can become a real hero', says another. While, finally, respondent number three states: 'It says something about your dreams: you play the person that you cannot be in real life but would like to be.'

While playing *World of Warcraft* several gamers thus immerse themselves in the mythopoeic reality of the game world and unleash, what Berger (1999) calls, the 'magical self' through the activity of role-playing. As one gamer stated: 'The impossible becomes possible. In *City of Heroes* you are a superhero with supernatural powers; you can do there what you cannot do in real life. I can't lift things with my thoughts, but I can do this in *City of heroes*. Just like *Spiderman* and the *X-Men*. And that is really cool!' Magic, Sigmund Freud (1999[1913]) argued about a century ago, is all about the 'omnipotence of thought'; magicians take their subjective and, according to Freud infantile and narcissistic, desires to control the natural world with their thoughts and feeling serious. Online environments provide the opportunity to, literally, play out such magical desires and fantasies.

4   Conclusion and discussion

The academic debate about secularization and disenchantment of Western society is generally informed by a focus on religious *belief*. Believing or not believing – that is the core issue.

We may question this relentless emphasis on (dis)belief in the sociology of religion and argue that it is increasingly a 'zombie category' (Beck 2001, p. 261). The concepts 'religious belief' and 'secular disbelief', in other words, may be 'living "dead categories" which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu' (Ibid.).

In this essay we explored the practice of play as a new, yet unacknowledged strategy to engage oneself with religious narratives in a disenchanted age. On the one hand, we suggested that contemporary spirituality (particularly paganism) is not grounded in firm 'beliefs': spiritual participants are generally quite aware of the social constructedness of supernatural claims and literally play with different religious traditions, assertions and myths to actively shape their own meaningful narrative or 'subjective myth' (Possamai 2005, p. 67). Playing an online computer game like *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, provides the opportunity for youngsters to experience meaningful feelings of enchantment without believing in underlying truth claims. Play, it may be concluded, provides a subtle and complex religious strategy in a disenchanted world. The cultural significance of play should particularly be attributed to its ambiguous nature (e.g., Bateson 1972; Huizinga (1950[1938]; Sutton-Smith 2001). According to Huizinga, for instance, the frivolous dimension of play can easily slide into seriousness, and vice versa. More than that: he explicitly acknowledged the elective affinity between play and religion in his conceptualization of play as a 'magic circle': it provides a 'temporary, a limited perfection (…) into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life' (Ibid., p. 10). For Huizinga this concept of a 'magic circle' is not just a loose metaphor: in the opening chapter of *Homo Ludens* he repeatedly emphasizes the affinity between the activity of play and the sacred – arguing, for instance, that 'The concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness' and that 'The ritual act, or an important part of it, will always remain within the play category, but in this seeming subordination the recognition of its holiness is not lost' (Ibid., p. 25, p. 27).

In this essay we aimed to demonstrate that such theoretical assumptions about the 'nature of play' are significant for the sociology of religion – particularly because they prove their value in empirically understanding the complex relation contemporary youngsters have with religion. The ambiguity of play makes it possible to be both seriously engaged and frivolously detached at the same time. More than that: play – in the frivolous meaning of the word – may also be used as an *alibi* to cover up for the serious, ultimately spiritual dimensions of playing a computer game like *World of Warcraft* (Aupers 2015). Notwithstanding the fact that they have had spiritual experiences

and perhaps reflected on religion while playing, gamers can in the end always say that 'it's just play!' Being in MMOs, in any case, provides the opportunity *par excellence* for 'disenchanted' youngsters to experience spirituality without believing in supernatural claims; to fully immerse themselves in the 'magic circle' without conversion to a pre-defined set of beliefs; to transcend everyday life without too much personal commitment and to freely experiment with religious narratives without becoming a true believer.

Bibliography

Adler, M 1986 [1997], *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Godess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, Beacon Press, Boston.

Aupers, S 2015 (forthcoming), 'Spiritual Play: Encountering the Sacred in *World of Warcraft*', in V Frissen, J de Mul & J Raessens (eds) *Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media and Identity,* Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Aupers, S 2011, 'Enchantment Inc. Online gaming between spiritual experience and commodity fetishism', in D Houtman & B. Meyer (eds), *Things: Material Religion and the Topography of Divine Spaces,* Fordham University Press, New York.

Aupers, S 2007, '"Better than the Real World". On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games', in T Meder (ed.), *Narratives, Roles and Beliefs in the New Age Era. Homo narrans - Homo ludens - Homo religiosus*, De Gruyter, Berlin and New York.

Aupers, S & D Houtman (eds) 2010, *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digita,* Brill Publishers, Leiden.

Bartle, R 2004, *Designing Virtual Worlds*, New Riders Publishers, Berkeley.

Bateson, G 1972, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Berger, H 1999, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia.

Campbell, C 2007, *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*, Paradigm Publishers, London.

Caputo, J 2001, *On Religion*, Routledge, New York.

Castranova, E 2005, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London.

Copier, M 2005 'Connecting Worlds: Fantasy Role-Playing Games, Ritual Acts and the Magic Circle', in S de Castell & J Jenson (eds), *Changing Views – Worlds in Play: Proceedings of the Second International Conference of DiGRA*, University of Vancouver, Vancouver.

Coleridge, ST 1967[1817], *Biographia Literaria*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Curry, P 1998[1997], *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth & Modernity*, Harper Collins Publishers, London.

Cusack, CM 2010, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, Ashgate, Burlington.

Davidsen, MA 2014, *The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-Based Religion*, University of Leiden (Dissertation), Leiden.

During, S 2002, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural power of Secular Magic*, Harvard University Press, London.

Freud, S 1999[1913], 'Totem en Taboe', in W Oranje (ed.), *Beschouwingen over cultuur*, Boom, Amsterdam.

Gardner, G 1954, *Witchcraft Today,* Rider, London.

Hanegraaff, WJ 1996, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Brill, Leiden.

Huizinga, J 1950[1938], *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston.

King, B & J Borland 2003, *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture. From Geek to Chic,* McGraw-Hill, New York and Chicago.

Kolo, C & T Baur 2004, 'Living a Virtual Life: Social Dynamics of Online Gaming', *Gamestudies,* vol 4., no. 1, viewed on 27 October 2014, <http://www.gamestudies.org>.

Krzywinska, T 2008, 'World Creation and Lore: *World of Warcraft* as Rich Text', in HG Corneliussen & JW Rettberg (eds), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, MIT Press, Cambridge & London.

Latour, B 1993[1991], *We Have Never Been Modern*, Prentice Hall, London and New York.

Luckmann, T 1967, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, Macmillan, New York.

Luhrmann, TM 1991[1989], *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Lynch, G 2007, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-First Century*, I.B. Tauris, London & New York.

Partridge, C 2004, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, Occulture*, T&T Clark, London & New York.

Possamai, A 2005, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*, Peter Lang Publishing Group, Berne.

Slater, D & G Ritzer 2001, 'Interview with Ulrich Beck', *Journal of Consumer Culture,* vol. 1, no. 1, p. 261.

Sutton-Smith, B 2001, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Harvard University Press, Boston.

Taylor, TL 2006, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge & London.

Tolkien, JRR 1937[2003], *The Hobbit,* HarperCollins, London.

Tolkien, JRR 1939[2004], *On fairy Stories,* viewed 27 October 2014
http://www.rivendellcommunity.org/Formation/Tolkien_On_Fairy_Stories.pdf.

Tolkien, JRR 1954[1987], *The Fellowship of the Ring, The Lord of the Rings,* Houghton   Mifflin, Boston.

Turkle, S 2002, 'Our Split Screens', *Etnofoor,* vol. 15, no. 1&2, pp. 5-19.

Weber, M 1956, *The Sociology of Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston.

Weber, M 1948[1919] 'Science as a Vocation', in HH Gerth & C Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge, London.

Woodcock, B 2009, 'An analysis of MMOG subscription growth. Version 21.0', viewed 21 March 2011, http://www.mmogchart.com.

York, M 1995, *The Emerging Networks: A Sociology of the New Age and Neopagan Movements*, Rowmann & Littlefield Publishers, London.

Yee, N 2007, 'Motivations of Play in Online Games', *Journal of CyberPsychology and Behavior,* vol. 9, pp. 772-775.

Games

Asheron's Call, 1999, Microsoft & Turbine Entertainment Software

Bilbo, 1989, Nils Eng

Dark Age of Camelot, 2001, Mythic Entertainment

Diablo, 1996, Blizzard North & Climax Group

Elendor, 1991, Platform independent

Everquest, 1999, Sony Online Entertainment

Lord of the Rings: Game One, 1985, Beam Software

Lord of the Rings Online, 2007, Turbine, Inc.

LORD, 1981, Olli J Paavola

The Balrogian Trilogy, 1989, Zenobi Software

The Mines of Moria, 1985, Eamon

The Shire, 1979, Plato System

Ring of Doom, 1983, Microworld

Ringen, 1979, Hansen, Pål-Kristian Engstad & Per Arne Engstad

Ulima Online, 1997, Origin Systems

World of Warcraft, 2004, Blizzard Entertainment

Biographies

STEF AUPERS is professor of 'media culture' at the Institute of Media Studies, Communication Sciences, University of Leuven. He published widely on religion, spirituality and conspiracy theories in modern society and, particularly, on the popularization and mediatization of these cultures through the internet and online computer games. His latest books are 'Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital' (edited with Dick Houtman, 2010, Brill publishers) and 'Paradoxes of Individualization: Social Control and Social Conflict in Contemporary Modernity' (with Dick Houtman and Willem de Koster, 2011, Ashgate Publishers).

Stef Aupers
Communication Sciences KU Leuven
Institute for Media Studies
Parkstraat 45, 3000 Leuven,
Belgium
P.O Box 3603
Phone +0032 – 016-372307
E-mail Stef.Aupers@soc.kuleuven.be

JULIAN SCHAAP is a PhD candidate and lecturer at the department of Arts and Culture Studies of the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC), Erasmus University Rotterdam. He received his Research Master's degree in 2013 (cum laude). Besides his research on religion and video games together with Stef Aupers, he works on his dissertation on ethno-racial boundary work in music reception. This international project is entitled 'Elvis has finally left the building? Boundary work, whiteness and the reception of rock music in comparative perspective.'

Julian Schaap
Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Room M7-05
Erasmus University Rotterdam
P.O. Box 1738 NL-3000 DR Rotterdam
The Netherlands
E-mail j.schaap@eshcc.eur.nl